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The Heiress, A Family Drama

By GEORGE WALKER
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Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz as Catherine and Ellise Chase as her aunt Mrs. Penniman, IU Theatre

The IU Theatre opens their 2018-2019 season with *The Heiress* directed by Dale McFadden. It's a solidly traditional play in the traditional Ruth N. Halls Theatre. Ruth and August Goetz's play from Henry James *Washington Square* might well be a three part series on Masterpiece Theatre. I'm George Walker for WFIU Arts.

The heiress of the play's title is Catherine Sloper. Her coldly intelligent father old Dr. Sloper regards her as good but dismisses the goodness for want of cleverness and marks her as disappointingly mediocre. The dissipatedly charming young Morris Townsend regards Catherine as a charm able, marriageable woman with currently ten thousand a year from her deceased mother and thirty thousand a year upon her father's death. In these years millions and billions, thousands don't seem significate, but in Henry James New York of the 1850s they represent real wealth.

The Heiress is very much a family drama and it requires some sorting. Dr. Sloper has been marked by the death of his talented wife following the birth Catherine, his less than talented daughter. He has two younger sisters. There's the wise and well married sister Mrs. Almond and the less than wise romantic widow Mrs. Penniman. It's at a gathering to celebrate the upcoming marriage of Mrs. Almond's daughter Marian to Arthur Townsend that allows his distant cousin Morris to meet Catherine.

As the heiress, Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz has the same problem that Olivia de Havilland wrestled with in the fine 1949 film. She's just too attractive for the character that Henry James described. However, she does an exemplary job with the gentle and hesitant portrayal in the early scenes. I think that her extended anguish at when her lover fails to come for their elopement runs a bit long and could use more modulation. But, her final scenes of stoicism and determination even in the face of her doctor father are potent.

Felix Merback does indeed make a dashing figure as Morris Townsend, Catherine's mercenary lover of the first act and the more broken and thoughtful man of the second. Despite the dash and the attention that he showers on the too easily impressed heiress, we're always aware of

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him, but on balance we're not too unhappy at his failure.

Morris is aided and abetted by Catherine's aunt Mrs. Penniman played by Elise Chase. Chase brings enough of her romantic fantasies and just plain meddling to make us suspicious of her. When both the doctor and Catherine are so angry at her meddling that they threaten to send her back up river to Poughkeepsie, I wished they had, but then I was powerfully reminded of just how vulnerable a widowed single female relative could be.

Speaking of vulnerability, Athena Kopulos had a solidly dramatic scene as the errant Morris Townsend's long suffering widowed sister, Mrs. Montgomery. In her interview with Dr. Sloper she was the most careful of witnesses for his sympathetic grilling. Henry James has offered a fine outline of a carefully nuanced support and damning of her brother. It's a quite wonderful moment of pure dignity from the doctor and the widow.

The assured IU Theatre production marks a curtain call for director Dale McFadden, but don't imagine that you won't have some more opportunities to see his work in the area. Chris Mueller was the creator of the Sloper's spacious living room with cleverly laid out entrances and exits and a nicely dramatic stair case. Jason Orlenko offered well thought out dress for the gentleman and one dazzling costume after another for the ladies, with plenty of extra ribbons and bows for Mrs. Penniman. Qi'er Luo's lighting helped the director and the actors make their points.

Quynn Hickey as the Irish servant Maria and Greta Kernkamp as the maid reminded us that there are no small parts, and in this case no small actors.

The IU Department of Theatre Drama and Contemporary Dance's production of *The Heiress* in the Ruth N. Halls Theatre plays September 21-29

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